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# A Cuban Revolutionary Visits the Nicaraguan Front

When, in 1958, my revolutionary *compaños* and I were fighting in Cuba's Sierra Maestra mountains against the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship, we had the aspiration of establishing a democracy in our country. Being young and full of ideals, I thought that freedom and justice were values that could not be limited to our national borders. To defend freedom and justice in my country, or for my country, while shrugging my shoulders indifferently at what happens in neighboring or brother countries would have been the same as denying the very essence of those values.

## The Americas

by Huber Matos

More than 25 years later, moved by the same ideals, I decided to go with several companions to the mountains of Nicaragua on a solidarity mission to the anti-Sandinista Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN).

Once in territory under the control of the FDN guerrillas, my first meeting of importance was a visit to the guerrilla leader known as Comandante Tigrillo (Little Tiger). In an improvised camp hospital, I listened to this illiterate farmer, who was immobilized by a wound he recently had received in combat, and whose face brightened up out of respect and enthusiasm for his close associates and his struggle. This unlettered man of the fields—using only his natural intelligence and experience—had my rapt attention when he lectured like a professional on the fundamentals and proceedings of irregular warfare.

Tigrillo had gone out to fight against the Sandinista regime in 1980, a few months after the junta attempted to collectivize the farmers and substitute their religious beliefs with "liberation theology." The defamnation of the Roman Catholic Church was an intolerable affront to the farmers, and many of them decided to fight for their beliefs.

However, many of these fighters and their relatives, inexperienced in warfare, were annihilated by the Sandinista army. Tigrillo and his group barely survived until they finally came in contact with FDN Comandante Enrique Bermudez, the military head of the FDN, who began to supply them with better weapons and ammunition. Tigrillo proved to be a natural leader, and by the time he was wounded he had

led more than a thousand peasants. His military victories and his popularity among the civil population are today legendary.

After a long journey inside Nicaragua, I was received by Comandante Bermudez and several of his officers. They gave us a detailed exposition of the situation. At the FDN camps we were able to appreciate the efficiency of the rebels' organizational structure. In almost all the areas of military activity I was able to see their clear superiority to the improvised way in which Fidel Castro used to lead our rebel army in the Sierra Maestras.

In our struggle against Batista, we had been less efficient in our logistics organization, in training and military intelligence. In one FDN camp we found a camp hospital, a workshop where uniforms are made, another where arms are repaired, and an efficient communications system that keeps in touch the approximately 12,000 guerrilla fighters that are now on Nicaraguan soil. Of those guerrilla fighters, only 40% fight actively. The rest have only enough ammunition to fend off attacks and are waiting for help from the outside.

Comandante Bermudez assigned me to a unit known as Special Operations Command that had a high degree of military preparedness. I marched with the unit deep into the Nicaraguan interior and found guerrilla groups that were being mobilized for tasks previously assigned. The unit was constantly meeting groups of farmers who wanted to join the guerrillas, hoping that arms might be given to them to fight the Sandinista army.

We visited several small farming villages, where I had the opportunity to speak with the residents about the Cuban experience, and where I was able to confirm the support and popularity of the FDN among the local population, something I previously had only assumed. No guerrilla force can make progress if it does not have popular support. Perhaps that is why the guerrillas in El Salvador have stalled, resorting to mass kidnappings, as reported by the Catholic Church and others in El Salvador. The FDN has more volunteers than it can handle.

The outlook and determination of the Nicaraguan guerrilla fighters are the same as those that allowed Cuban revolutionaries to face hardships in the Sierra Maestra mountains. However, I found some significant differences. Practically the whole guerrilla army is made up of peasants; in the rebel army I was part of, there was a greater proportion of members of the middle class. This difference might be due to a

greater farming population in Nicaragua than in Cuba.

Another difference between our struggle in Cuba and that of the Nicaraguan rebels is that their enemy—the Sandinistas—is receiving massive military hardware and personnel from two powerful and repressive regimes, the Soviet Union and Cuba; we in the Sierra Maestras were fighting only against other Cubans. To us, outside support for the Batista regime was not a problem, because we had much more international support than Batista did and because Washington took its backing away from the Cuban dictator toward the end of the fight.

The Nicaraguan freedom fighters know that they don't have the support they deserve from the indecisive democratic world, but that does not demoralize them. They expect that the growing recognition they have been gaining will become unanimous among democratic countries. And they are absolutely convinced that if the communist regime that rules Nicaragua is not eradicated, it will be extended throughout Central America until it goes as far as the border of the U.S., an opinion I share completely.

To believe that communism can be contained at the Nicaraguan borders through negotiation is an illusion that is based on ignorance of a standard communist tactic: Use negotiation for settlements that you have no intention of honoring to stall for time. A consolidated communist regime in Nicaragua would destabilize all the countries of the region, even if the Nicaraguan air force does not obtain one single Soviet-made MiG fighter jet.

From what I have seen, I am convinced that if the rebels were able to arm the thousands of men that would join their ranks, they could develop a force to defeat the Sandinista army. In order to combat a guerrilla movement, a government has to have 10 times its number of fighters, and that is the reason the Managua regime has been unable to stop either the progress or the growth the FDN has achieved.

The Nicaraguan anti-communist rebels hope that politicians in Washington understand the seriousness of their situation and give them the material support they need to defeat the Managua regime, which grows more repressive by the day. Some of the guerrilla fighters have their hopes pinned on what they refer to as "Ronald Reagan's firmness" against totalitarianism.

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